



Exploring the Lived Experiences of _Women in Rural Domestic Roles_ in Community-Based Digital Literacy Programs

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ABSTRACT

Digital literacy has emerged as a key component of inclusive education and community development, especially in underserved rural settings. While various programs have aimed to improve digital access, limited attention has been paid to how women—particularly rural women homemakers—subjectively experience these initiatives. The emotional, social, and cultural meanings embedded in their learning journeys remain underexplored, raising the question: how do rural housewives experience and make sense of community-based digital literacy programs? This study uses an interpretative phenomenological approach to investigate the lived experiences of ten women homemakers residing in a remote agricultural village in Central Java, Indonesia, who were participating in a structured digital literacy program. Participants were aged between 30 and 50, mostly with primary or secondary education, and not previously engaged in formal digital learning. Data were collected through in-depth, semi-structured interviews and analyzed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). The interviews were conducted in participants' homes and local community centers over a six-week period. The analysis revealed three central themes: initial fear and technological anxiety, digital learning as a source of personal empowerment, and cultural negotiation in adapting to digital practices. These findings illuminate how digital literacy is experienced not as a mere technical skill but as a transformative process that reshapes participants' identities and social roles. The study enhances our understanding of digital inclusion by highlighting the affective and cultural dimensions of learning, often overlooked by outcome-driven models. These insights have implications for the design of future literacy programs, emphasizing the need for culturally sensitive and psychologically supportive approaches.



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INTRODUCTION

In recent decades, the rapid advancement of digital technologies has transformed the way individuals' access, process, and share information. This shift has significantly influenced educational paradigms, prompting the integration of digital literacy programs across various social settings, including marginalized and rural communities. Despite technological progress, a persistent digital divide continues to limit access and participation, particularly among women in low-resource areas. In many rural societies, housewives often remain at the periphery of digital innovation due to cultural expectations, economic constraints, and limited exposure to formal education systems.

This exclusion reflects not just infrastructural limitations, but deeper gendered and cultural asymmetries that shape digital engagement. Previous studies on digital literacy have predominantly focused on quantifiable outcomes such as skill acquisition or employment readiness, often overlooking the interpretive and emotional dimensions of learning among women in traditional domestic roles. While some qualitative research has explored women's digital empowerment in urban or semi-urban contexts, there remains a notable gap in phenomenological studies that center rural homemakers' subjective experiences in navigating community-based digital literacy programs.

This study draws on interpretative phenomenology and further anchors its analysis in intersectionality and digital feminist theory to examine how gender, socio-economic status, and cultural norms intersect to influence digital engagement. Digital literacy, within such frameworks, is approached not simply as technical training but as an embodied and socially negotiated process that may foster empowerment, identity reconfiguration, and greater inclusion. By attending to these dimensions, the study challenges instrumentalist approaches and contributes to a richer understanding of how digital learning unfolds within the fabric of rural domestic life.

Understanding how rural housewives experience digital literacy within their everyday lives requires a deeper exploration that goes beyond surface-level assessments. Their journeys are embedded in contexts of family responsibility, gender norms, and cultural identity, making their engagement with technology both deeply personal and socially constructed. In this light, the phenomenon is not only educational but also existential, touching on how individuals reinterpret their roles and agency through learning.

Given these complexities, there is a pressing need to explore how digital literacy is lived and made meaningful by women who have historically been marginalized in both educational and technological domains. Phenomenology offers a valuable framework for capturing such experiences in a way that honors their subjectivity and context. By focusing on meaning-making from the participant's perspective, this study seeks to illuminate the often-overlooked dimensions of digital inclusion as experienced by rural housewives.

Within the broader discourse on digital inclusion and community-based learning, research focusing on individuals lived experiences has become increasingly critical. As digital literacy initiatives expand into rural and underserved populations, understanding how participants internalize and make meaning of these programs is essential. Scholars have recognized that technical access alone does not guarantee meaningful engagement, especially for women who occupy socially and culturally defined roles within domestic spaces¹. The subjective experience of navigating new technologies—often amidst resistance, uncertainty, and limited prior exposure—demands methodological sensitivity to context, meaning, and personal transformation.

Despite this recognition, much of the existing literature remains dominated by outcome-driven, quantitative approaches that prioritize metrics such as skill acquisition, frequency of usage, or program completion rates. While such data offer valuable insights, they fall short in capturing the affective, reflective, and identity-related dimensions of digital learning. Traditional surveys and standardized assessments are limited in their ability to uncover the emotional labor, cultural negotiation, and personal reinterpretation that participants undergo in the learning process. As a result, these methods often obscure the very human dimensions of transformation that define the success of digital literacy initiatives for marginalized groups.

This methodological gap has constrained the capacity of prior studies to explore the essence of the phenomenon from the perspective of those who experience it directly. The absence of interpretative depth has led to an oversimplified understanding of how digital literacy is lived, especially by rural women balancing household duties, societal expectations, and self-empowerment. Addressing this limitation requires a shift from surface-level observations to a more nuanced, phenomenologically grounded inquiry that can illuminate the meanings participants assign to their learning journeys. In this context, interpretative phenomenology provides a powerful lens to explore how digital literacy is not merely adopted, but embodied and negotiated within the everyday lives of rural housewives.

Most existing responses to the challenge of digital literacy in rural communities have centered on implementing structured, skill-based programs aimed at increasing access to technology and improving functional competencies. These interventions typically rely on standardized pedagogical models and assessment metrics that emphasize measurable outcomes such as the number of sessions attended or the ability to use specific digital tools. While such practical approaches are valuable in expanding access and fostering basic digital skills, they often overlook the deeper, lived realities of

participants—particularly women whose engagement with technology is shaped by cultural norms, familial responsibilities, and internalized perceptions of capability.

This prevailing reliance on surface-level metrics and predetermined content delivery fails to capture the subjective experiences, emotional negotiations, and personal transformations that are fundamental to meaningful learning. As a result, the richness of how digital literacy is actually lived—especially by marginalized populations such as rural housewives—remains underexplored. The psychological and social dynamics of learning in these contexts are reduced to isolated data points, detached from the embodied and relational aspects of human experience.

To address these limitations, a phenomenological approach is needed—one that prioritizes the interpretation of participants lived experiences over objective measurement. Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), in particular, offers a framework for accessing the personal meaning structures that emerge as individuals encounter new forms of knowledge within specific cultural and social settings¹. Through this lens, digital literacy is not merely a skill set to be acquired but a phenomenon to be understood through the eyes of those who live it. Yet, to date, few studies have employed this approach to investigate how women in rural environments engage with and make sense of digital learning opportunities. This gap presents a critical opportunity to explore not just what participants do, but how they feel, perceive, and interpret their journey into the digital world.

Previous studies have explored the role of digital literacy in improving access to information, social inclusion, and economic opportunity. However, few have examined how participants personally experience these programs, particularly women in rural communities. Research has often focused on external outcomes, neglecting the emotional, social, and cultural meanings embedded in the learning process. Theoretical frameworks in adult education and community learning acknowledge the role of context, but empirical studies rarely prioritize subjective perspectives. This highlights a gap in literature where the voices and experiences of marginalized learners remain underrepresented.

This study adopts an interpretative phenomenological approach to explore how rural housewives experience digital literacy through community-based programs. This method was chosen to access the inner meanings and sense-making processes of participants as they engage with unfamiliar digital tools. It responds to the need for a more nuanced understanding of how technology is integrated into lives shaped by traditional roles and limited resources. Rather than focusing on performance or outcomes, this study seeks to reveal how digital learning is felt, understood, and lived. Through this approach, the research offers insight into how women in such contexts define and transform their identities through literacy.

The article is structured as follows: the introduction outlines the background, significance, and gaps in current research. The next section provides contextual information about digital literacy programs and the sociocultural setting of the participants. The methodology section details the phenomenological approach, including participant selection, data collection, and interpretative analysis. This is followed by a results section presenting key experiential themes derived from the interviews. The article concludes with a discussion of findings, theoretical implications, and suggestions for practice and future research.

RESEARCH METHODS

Study Design

This study employed an interpretative phenomenological approach to explore the lived experiences of rural housewives participating in a community-based digital literacy program. As a qualitative methodology rooted in the philosophical tradition of Heidegger, interpretative phenomenology emphasizes the contextualized meaning of human experience, acknowledging that individuals interpret their world based on personal, cultural, and social contexts. This design was selected to gain a deep understanding of how participants perceive and make sense of their engagement with digital literacy within the constraints of domestic life and rural culture. The approach allowed for the identification of essential themes and meanings embedded in participants'

narratives, aligning with the study's aim to explore subjective experiences rather than objective outcomes.

Participants

Participants consisted of housewives residing in rural communities who had actively participated in a structured digital literacy program facilitated by a local community organization. A purposive sampling strategy was used to select individuals who had direct and prolonged experience with the program. Inclusion criteria required participants to be adult women (aged 25–60 years), reside in the village for at least two years, and have completed at least three months of participation in the digital literacy classes. Exclusion criteria included individuals with professional experience in information technology or those engaged in formal education beyond secondary school, to ensure that the focus remained on non-expert, community-based learners. The final sample included ten participants, with ages ranging from 28 to 57 years. All participants were married, with the majority identifying their primary occupation as domestic work or informal sector labor.

Data Collection

Data were collected through in-depth, semi-structured interviews conducted face-to-face in a setting chosen by the participants, typically their homes or a local community center. An interview guide was developed based on the research question, containing open-ended prompts to elicit detailed personal narratives related to digital literacy engagement, challenges, and transformations. Interviews were conducted over a two-month period, each lasting between 45 and 75 minutes. All interviews were audio-recorded with consent, transcribed verbatim, and supported by field notes. The interview environment was arranged to ensure privacy, comfort, and cultural appropriateness, allowing participants to speak freely without external pressure. The interview guide was reviewed by qualitative experts and adapted slightly to reflect the local language and expressions relevant to the participants' context.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), following the six-step framework proposed by Smith, Flowers, and Larkin. The analysis began with immersive reading of each transcript, followed by initial noting to capture descriptive, linguistic, and conceptual comments. Meaning units were identified, coded, and clustered into emergent themes through iterative reflection and interpretation. Cross-case analysis was then conducted to develop shared patterns while retaining idiographic details. Data management and coding were facilitated using NVivo 12 software, which assisted in organizing themes without replacing the interpretative process. This analytical procedure enabled the discovery of core experiential structures, revealing how participants made sense of their digital learning journey within their social and cultural environments.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval for this study was obtained from the Institutional Research Ethics Committee of the affiliated university. All participants were provided with detailed information regarding the study objectives, procedures, and their rights as participants. Written informed consent was obtained prior to data collection. To ensure confidentiality, pseudonyms were used in all transcripts and publications, and identifying details were omitted or anonymized. Data were securely stored, accessible only to the research team, and handled in accordance with national and international ethical guidelines for qualitative research.

RESULTS

This section presents the findings of the study, organized into three major themes that emerged through Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) of the participants' narratives. The data were derived from in-depth interviews with housewives in rural communities who participated in a community-based digital literacy program. Each theme reflects the participants' subjective meanings and lived experiences as they engaged with the program, revealing deeper insights into their challenges, motivations, and transformations.

Navigating Fear and Technological Anxiety

Participants consistently reported a strong sense of initial fear and anxiety toward digital devices and technology. This fear was deeply rooted in a lack of prior exposure, combined with cultural perceptions that technology was reserved for the younger generation or for people outside the domestic sphere. Several participants described feeling “unqualified” or “too old to learn,” yet still chose to participate in the program.

“I was afraid to even touch the smartphone. I thought I might break it... But then my daughter said, ‘It’s okay, Mom, try it, it’s for learning.’ That gave me courage.” (Participant 3)

This theme highlights the internal conflict between technological apprehension and the motivation to improve personal literacy. The presence of intergenerational encouragement, particularly from children, became a crucial bridge that allowed participants to overcome their fears and engage with digital learning environments.

Learning as an Act of Empowerment

Engaging in the digital literacy program provided participants not only with technical skills, but also with a renewed sense of self-worth and agency. Many described the act of learning as empowering, particularly in light of social roles that had previously confined them to domestic labor. The ability to search for information, use messaging apps, or access health and religious content online was seen as transformational.

“Now I can read the news on my phone. Before, I would just listen to neighbors. But now, I check it myself. It makes me feel independent.” (Participant 7)

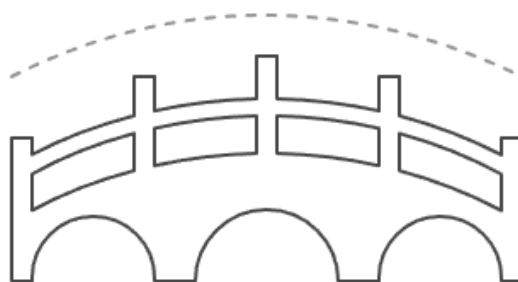
This theme suggests that literacy, particularly digital literacy, had redefined their position in the household and community. Participants expressed a sense of pride in being able to contribute to family discussions or help their children with schoolwork. These experiences reflect a shift in how participants perceived themselves—from passive receivers of knowledge to active seekers and users of information.

Digital Literacy Empowers Women to Become Active Information Seekers



Limited Agency

Confined to domestic roles.



Empowered Position

Active seekers redefine roles in community.

Cultural Negotiations and Domestic Adaptation

The integration of digital tools into daily life required participants to navigate cultural expectations and traditional gender roles. Some participants noted resistance from spouses or elders who believed that technology use was “inappropriate” or “unnecessary” for housewives. However, the contextualization of digital literacy within local cultural values—such as using smartphones to access religious sermons or recipes for traditional dishes—helped participants gain social acceptance.

“At first, my husband said, ‘Why do you need a smartphone? That’s not for women like you.’ But when I showed him how I listened to Quran recitations on it, he was surprised and said, ‘That’s good.’” (Participant 1)

This theme underscores the adaptive strategies used by participants to harmonize digital practices with existing cultural norms. Through selective usage and justification, participants legitimized their learning in ways that were socially acceptable and personally meaningful.

The findings of this study illuminate the layered and nuanced experiences of rural housewives as they engaged with a community-based digital literacy program. Their journeys reveal a trajectory from fear to empowerment, and from cultural negotiation to transformation. These lived experiences demonstrate how digital literacy can serve not only as a skill-building process but also as a deeply personal and culturally embedded act of self-affirmation.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study revealed that rural housewives' engagement with digital literacy programs is marked by a transformative journey from fear to empowerment, shaped by cultural negotiation and contextual adaptation. These experiences reflect deeply personal processes through which technology becomes meaningful, as participants reinterpret their roles, capabilities, and social presence in light of their new digital skills. This directly addresses the central research question concerning how rural housewives perceive and experience their involvement in community-based digital literacy programs.

The study contributes a nuanced understanding of the subjective realities that accompany digital inclusion in marginalized communities. Rather than viewing digital literacy as a uniform process of skill acquisition, the participants' narratives emphasize emotional vulnerability, intergenerational support, and sociocultural tension. The findings show that digital literacy, when situated within traditional domestic roles and community expectations, becomes a space for identity reconstruction and self-empowerment. This research thus moves beyond conventional evaluations of program success and sheds light on how learning is internalized and made personally significant by women in rural settings.

These results are consistent with prior phenomenological research on learning and technology, which emphasizes the importance of lived experience in shaping the meaning of educational engagement. Smith et al. (2009) highlighted that subjective interpretation is central to understanding how individuals construct knowledge within their social world, a concept supported by the present study's insights into how participants negotiate familial, cultural, and technological boundaries. Furthermore, this study complements findings by Akbar et al. (2021), who noted that digital literacy in rural areas often involves emotional and cultural barriers not captured by quantitative assessments. However, unlike earlier studies that focused primarily on access and barriers, this study highlights the relational and affective dimensions of learning, offering a richer interpretation of what it means to become digitally literate in a culturally embedded context.

The implications of these findings are both theoretical and practical. From a socio-cultural perspective, the study illustrates how digital literacy functions not merely as a technical skillset, but as a deeply embedded cultural and emotional process for rural women. The narratives of participants reflect how learning to use digital tools reconfigures their sense of identity, agency, and familial roles. Practically, these insights suggest that literacy programs should be designed with greater sensitivity to emotional readiness, gender dynamics, and cultural values. Program developers and policymakers may benefit from integrating reflective spaces and supportive environments that acknowledge the psychological and social dimensions of digital engagement, especially for marginalized female populations.

Despite the depth of insight generated, this study has certain limitations. As a phenomenological inquiry, the findings are grounded in the specific lived experiences of ten rural housewives in a particular community setting. The sample size and purposive selection strategy, while

appropriate for in-depth exploration, limit the generalizability of the findings to broader populations. Additionally, the data reflect participants' narratives at a single point in time, without longitudinal follow-up to assess the durability of their learning experiences. While these limitations are inherent to the nature of phenomenological research, they point to opportunities for complementary studies that could provide broader contextualization.

Future research can build on these findings by exploring digital literacy experiences across different regions, generations, or cultural groups to examine patterns of meaning and transformation. Longitudinal studies could offer insight into how digital engagement evolves over time, particularly in relation to women's roles, community participation, and access to social capital. There is also potential to investigate how culturally tailored interventions, grounded in phenomenological insight, can enhance digital literacy outcomes in underserved populations. These directions may contribute to a more inclusive and human-centered digital literacy framework that values experience as much as efficiency.

CONCLUSION

This study offered a phenomenological account of how rural women homemakers experience community-based digital literacy programs, revealing not only shifts in technical competencies but deeper processes of identity negotiation and cultural adaptation. Rather than reiterating known barriers, the analysis illuminated how emotional resilience, familial roles, and collective learning spaces contribute to meaning-making in digital contexts. These findings move beyond outcome-centric paradigms by illustrating digital literacy as an affective, socially embedded transformation. Importantly, the study underscores the need for program designers to move away from one-size-fits-all models, instead foregrounding the everyday realities, values, and domestic constraints of rural women learners. Policies and pedagogies should account for the intersection of gender, culture, and socioeconomic position in shaping access and learning trajectories. For future research, more granular, time-sensitive investigations are recommended. Ethnographic follow-ups could trace the evolving digital practices of participants over time, while participatory action research (PAR) would enable rural women to co-design literacy interventions, ensuring greater cultural resonance and sustainability. Additionally, comparative studies across rural regions with different cultural norms could enrich cross-contextual understanding of digital inclusion.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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